International art thefts in 1975 numbered 33,840, with a dollar value of at least $25 million.

A growing concern over the theft of art

By Robert Taylor
Globe Staff

Early in July six paintings — including two Boudins, a Twachtman and a Sanford Gifford — valued by police at $385,000, were stolen at night from the Cambridge home of Harvard president Derek Bok.

In February, a Newton residence was burgled, and 21 paintings were taken, including an Edward Munch.

A 17th Century Dutch painting, Godfried Schalken's "Reclining Venus and Satyr," was filched from Hartford's Wadsworth Athenaeum in January; the Andrew Wyeth oil "South Cushing," valued at $100,000, vanished among the loot of a Wenham housebreak in March; and three weeks ago thieves hijacked a hoard of objects from Gloucester's Hammond Museum, including a putative Raphael.

New England enjoys an unhappy distinction as one of the American centers of art thefts. Ranking second only to the traffic in narcotics, art theft is the second biggest international crime, and has been for several years. Naturally, art crooks gravitate where the action is, hence thefts in the United States are concentrated largely in New York, Philadelphia, Los Angeles and Boston.

Meeting in New York last week, the International Association of Art Security discussed the recent jump in insurance rates on valuable paintings (a rise due to the number of thefts, and another burden on already overtaxed cultural institutions), new techniques of security, and trends in art crime. Thomas F. Kissane, president of the association, reported international art thefts in 1975 numbered 33,840, with a dollar value of at least $25 million.

Illustration by Vaughan McGrath for the Boston Globe

Thefts rose from 26,240 a year earlier.

The largest number of thefts — 9460 during 1975 and 7400 a year earlier — came from the US. Kissane attributed the heists to international and organized syndicates, which have the capacity to control networks of operatives and funnel works of art across borders and into collections, public and private, where few questions are asked. The free-lance thief is under the handicap of having to convert a hot masterpiece into ready cash. Coins can be melted down, precious stones fragmented; but pictures present a problem in disposability. Highly-organized thieves have the necessary market contacts.

Art theft is one of the most taboo subjects among museum administrators yet museums are in part responsible for the increase in the popularity of art crime. It was not until record prices began to receive publicity and Rembrandts, Velasquez and Pollocks soared in value, that art crime became fashionable. Since museums act as repositories for validated masterworks, museums patently affect the

ART, Page B6

Art thefts

★ ART
Continued from Page B1

price of art through what is purchased and what is removed from the market. The major institutions have relatively sophisticated security, but the Hammond Castle and the Malden Library, both hit by theft, are more typical of the sort of target lately favored by thieves, places where there is art and where security, either because of budgetary or other considerations, presents a problem.

Although the thieves who stole a Rembrandt, a Picasso and two Gauguins from the Worcester Art Museum four years ago reputedly planned to dispose of the pictures behind the Iron Curtain, and while one is always hearing rumors of established routes of disposal, paintings in Swiss banks and kleptomaniac art lovers, the motive behind most art burglaries is ransom. This was evidently the case in the theft at high noon during April, 1975, or Rembrandt's portrait of his sister Elizabeth, from the Boston Museum of Fine Arts. Negotiations were almost immediately instigated between the owners of the picture (it was on long-term loan to the Museum) and the First Security Services Company, an investigative agency. Eventually the Rembrandt was recovered in the parking lot of a Boston restaurant as the result of information supplied the authorities by Myles J. Connor Jr., who made a deal to avoid a 10-year sentence in a Federal penitentiary in favor of a lesser sentence in state prison.

Rembrandts, incidentally, are favorites with criminals, because of the artist's reputation and because Rembrandt often painted smaller pictures, which can be stashed in suitcases.

Political ransom is a recent manifestation of thefts in the art world. In 1974 a group of IRA sympathizers made off with a collection of Goyas, Gainsboroughs and Vermeers stolen from a Dublin mansion, and demanded a $1.2 million ransom and concessions for Irish political prisoners. Bridget Rose Dugdale, leader of the gang, was quickly caught and sentenced to nine years.

Political ransom, however, like the mad collector, is a secondary issue. According to Kissane, there has been a big rise in forgeries, especially in the field of "original" prints; and, according to art detective Robert Volpe, a mounting trend in the theft of lesser-known works, bagged from galleries and private collections, seems evident.

These pieces are seldom registered, and offer problems in law enforcement.

"What impressed me," said a Newbury street proprietor whose gallery was burgled, "was the lack of enthusiasm of the police on the case. If the thieves had taken a typewriter or a TV set, the police would have perceived it as an object of value. The robbery was a first-hand lesson to me in the isolation of art from the rest of the community."

Bernard Pucker, who lost 15 master graphics, including a Braque and a Matisse, from his Pucker-Safrai Gallery in a robbery two years ago (he has since been contacted about their recovery, which indicates that smaller objects are equally hard to dispose of), believes the rise in art theft is no greater than the rise of crime throughout society in general.

"It's my observation that people are stealing things because they want them," he says. "Why would anyone steal an Eskimo whalebone sculpture or an African mask or a small sculpture by a local artist? The profit compared to the risk is negligible."

Pucker believes professionals are gradually realizing art thefts don't pay because of the difficulty of translating masterpieces into money. Amateurs, however, bedazzled by publicity about prices, enamored by a work and confused by what they suppose society owes them, will commit senseless crimes. "This has a lot to do with societal attitudes," he says. "I don't see it as epidemic, however. You know, the museums are right in soft-pedaling art theft. If 'mysterious disappearance' — as the insurance companies call it — really was an epidemic, you'd have two responses: shock and horror, and, 'Hey, that looks great, let's get involved.' It isn't happening. I remember X. telling me about his show of Remington sculpture on Newbury street 40 years ago. More pieces were stolen, he said, than were sold. Today's art scene is comparable, only you have more people involved, a broader audience. The worst aspect of our robberies was, for me, the invasion of privacy. If art theft is a professional hazard, there's no real pattern to it."